DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 149 669 HE 009 582

AUTHOR	Mather, Anne D.
TITLE	Learning Your CBC's. Regional Spotlight Vol. IX, No. 1.
INSTITUTION	Southern Regional Education Board, Atlanta, Ga.
PUB DATE	Sep 74
NOTE	9p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Southern Regional Education Board, 130 Sixth Street, NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30313
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Accreditation (Institutions); *College Curriculum; College Faculty; *College Programs; *Curriculum Development; Educational Accountability; Educationally Disadvantaged; Grading; *Higher Education; *Performance Based Education; Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

Competency-based curriculum (CBC) is as old as learning itself, in theory. In practice, its applications have been limited. It came of age in 1968, moving from obscurity to visibility. A source of some discussion is the difference between CBC and experience- or knowledge-based learning, and between CBC and performance based education. The terminology is not yet well established. The characteristics of CBC are reviewed in a modified speech by Richard L. Meeth; comments on CBC and grading, faculty, accreditation, and the disadvantaged are made by professionals. A listing of CBC programs in nine institutions describes program features, funding, and publications. (MSE)

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REGIONAL SPOTLIGHT

SOUTHERN REGIONAL EDUCATION BOARD

NEWS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE SOUTH

Vol. IX, No. 1 September, 1974

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A New Alphabet for Higher Education?

Learning Your CBC's

Competency-based curricula (CBC)—a movement to base learning on students' attainment of set competencies—is, experts allows, as old as learning itself. At least in theory. In fact, Michigan State College (now University), which served as a model for the U.S. Land-Grant colleges and universities, raised **the** question central to CBC back in 1855: "How can we transfer college learning to the outside, to life?"

In practice, however, the applications of CBC have been limited. On a widespread scale, push didn't come to shove until the late 1960's, the end of a decade marked by the probing of traditions and an emphasis on "accountability" for all institutions, including educational ones.

1968 is generally pinpointed as the year when CBC "came of age," when it moved from near obscurity to visibility. That year, each of the 10 models in the U.S.O.E. Elementary Models Project developed new programs that emphasized a competency-based approach for preparing elementary school teachers. In the five years since then, at least 60 percent of the states have begun teacher certification on a competency base. In other states individual colleges and universities are experimenting with the approach.

With an eye to this track record, faculty and administrators in general graduate and undergraduate programs have begun to consider the relevance of a competency-based approach to other fields. Is competency the answer to the liberal arts' increasing problems with accountability, they ask, or is it sacrilegious to even suggest making the arts and humanities accountable?

It's one of many questions being asked about CBC, not the least of which is what is the accepted terminology for the movement as it applies to general graduate and undergraduate programs. As one educator put it, "We've got the first two words, but we haven't agreed on the third yet." Thus one hears the terms "competency-based education. . .learning. . . curricula . . . programming" used almost interchangeably.

Another question concerns the distinction between competency-based and performance-based education. Although the terms are often used synonymously, strictly speaking, performance-based refers to the development of a particular course, competency-based to an entire curriculum or program. The added component in CBC, according to Russell Edgerton, Deputy Director of the Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education, is an integrating "vision" or image of the competencies a person ought to have to be a successful adult. Exactly what that image or vision is, each institution determines.

Advocates contend that CBC also differs from experience- or knowledge-based learning because it offers a greater variety of options for students and in some areas, such as method of instruction, changes emphases entirely.

Thus, CBC admissions criteria include the traditional standardized tests and previous academic records, but also embrace counseling and procedures for assessing previously acquired competencies and for predicting motivation skills. The traditional method of assessment—periodic paper and pencil exams—is likewise supplemented by the use of new agents (peers, external examiners) and/or new techniques (videotapes of performance, self-ratings or simulation).

Perhaps the best definition of CBC we've heard comes from Edgerton, who calls it "a self-consciousness about purpose." By that definition, the arguments and questions about the relevance, exact characteristics and even the newness of CBC are as pertinent as CBC itself—they are, in fact, what CBC is all about. So in this special issue, we're turning the spotlight on CBC to determine **its** purposes, to answer questions and pose questions not yet answered, to, if you will, see what competencies CBC sets for itself.

The Characteristics of Competency-

The following is an adapted version of a speech at a June SREB-sponsored conference on competency-based curricula in general undergraduate programs given by Dr. L. Richard Meeth, Associate Professor of Higher Education, SUNY at Buffalo, and CBC consultant/evaluator for numerous institutions.

What is competence?

Relying on the dictionary definition, it is simply "the ability to do." In the context of higher education, competence is the minimum knowledge, skills, values and/or attitudes a person can be certified to possess based on a set of criteria or level of expectation.

Who decides what the competencies will be?

There are seven authority bases now in use by colleges and universities with competency-based programs. 1. **the individual himself.** Students are writing their own statements of competence in a number of programs around the country. 2. **The recipients of competence.** For example, the patients of a doctor, the student of a teacher. 3 .**Practitioners.** People in the field who are graduates of a program of study. 4. **Faculty.** This is the most frequently used authority base. 5. **Employers.** 6. **Experts.** These are consultants or people outside an agency or organization who write or design competency statements. 7. **Government.** For many colleges, this is the primary agent for setting competencies—state boards, legislatures, federal agencies.

By whose authority is a person competent?

Any one or a collection of the above seven categories might also determine when a person has met the competencies. The same persons should not both set the competencies and determine when they have been met, however.

How does "competency" differ from "behavioral objectives"?

Some argue that there is very little difference except that competencies are phrased in the present tense instead of the future tense. But there are important differences. Behavioral objectives tend to be reductionist, to break learning into smaller and smaller units, whereas competency tends to be more global or gestalt by nature. In design, the broader the skill or the knowledge base, the more appropriate are competencies.

Moreover, behavioral objectives can, by definition, include only overt behavior; competence can include covert behavior, as well, such as thinking and feeling activities. As a result, competencies are open to a broader range of evaluation techniques, including ones which do not rely on objective observation and measurement.

Finally, the emphases of the approaches differ. Behavioral objectives stress what the teacher will do to get the student to the point of competence, whereas competence stresses what the learner must do or must know.

What are the components of a competence curriculum?

1. Explicit specification of educational goals in terms of competencies learners are to acquire. 2. Development of procedures for assessing achievement of competencies. 3. Designing learning experiences directly for the attainment of these competencies.

Do competencies relate to a broad base?

In too many instances they do not. But in theory, they should. If competencies are to be any different from a collection of courses, then they need to be related in some way to a learning or knowledge theory.

What is more important, the experience of learning or its meaning?

The experience itself is meaningless in a competency-based program. The meaning of the experience is what is important. The conscious recognition and evaluation of the knowledge, skill, value or attitude is what competency is all about.

The emphasis given to exposure is one of the fundamental differences between an experience-based curriculum and a competency-based one. Thus, credit for life experience is an inappropriate concept in a competency curriculum. What matters is credit for the meaning of the experiences as they relate to specific competencies. Consequently, students who come to college expecting credit for four years in Vietnam may be disappointed in a competency curriculum, because if they cannot apply what they have learned to the competencies that the college has set, or the student sets, then they get no credit for it.

How is modular learning related to competence?

Modular learning is not inherent or indigenous to the concept of competency. It is a natural movement in competency education to seek the most efficient learning experiences possible, and this has led some toward modules. But modules certainly are not absolute in a competency design.

Can a competence curriculum be developmental?

A curriculum will be developmental if the competencies are based on a developmental theory

Based Curricula

of learning—that is, if they are tied together. A curriculum can also be developmental by letting the students design their own competencies, as at the Community College of Vermont, and by having a sequence of assessment as well as a sequence of learning, so that all assessment does not take place in the last weeks of an academic year. Finally, the range of experiences recommended to the learner for meeting competence also contributes to a developmental curriculum.

How does the faculty role change in a competence curriculum?

Dramatically. Faculty members change from being basically disseminators of information to facilitators of learning. Thus faculty in competency programs spend the majority of their time evaluating learning; second in priority and time is advising students; third is what they traditionally did—teaching courses. An enormous amount of time and energy goes into developing new faculty roles and into re-tooling the faculty; in fact, this is probably the most difficult task in moving to CBC.

How do credit hours and grades differ in CBC?

Theoretically, the concept of competency rules out the need for grades and credit. But the motivation structure of higher education and the meritocratic society are such that probably neither can be completely abolished. Some institutions may want to arbitrarily operate two evaluation systems, one based on credits and grades and the other on accomplishment of competence. Eventually, the system based on credits and grades might then be phased out.

Regardless, CBC is criterion- rather than normative-referenced. That is, a student's achievement is measured against pre-set standards, not against what is typical for his fellows.

How much does a competence curriculum cost?

There are no definitive answers to this question yet, although a number of people are working on it. It appears that the start-up costs for a competence curriculum are about 25 percent greater than the average cost of education. This figure includes faculty time, in-kind costs and the like.

What are the greatest problems with a competence curriculum?

1. **Quality control.** As long as assessment is based upon more or less random processes, sometimes using jury panels, sometimes not, with various kinds of membership at different times, the problem of quality control will continue. Perhaps it's unavoidable. 2. **Faculty role and faculty time.** It takes a great deal of time and energy to develop new faculty roles and to re-tool the faculty. Also, so much faculty time is used in the assessment process that there may be little time left for thinking seriously about the overall program, designing new competencies or revising learning experiences. However, this problem will probably be solved as faculty members gain experience in designing evaluation methodologies. Nevertheless, developing a CBC can become a 24-hour-a-day process, six or seven days a week. As Bud Hodgkinson put it, "Where are faculty members going to find time for recharging their own batteries?" Thus, the whole area of faculty compensation and reward structures has to be examined. 3. **Developing criteria and methodologies for evaluation.** 4. **Getting students to come in for evaluations.**

For Further Information

A Competency-Based Undergraduate (CUE) Action-Research Center began in July at Bowling Green State University, Ohio. Under a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, CUE Center will act as a national clearinghouse on competency-based general education programs and will prepare annotated bibliographies for national distribution. Contact Dr. Gary Woditsch, CUE Center Director.

INTRODUCTORY BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Giardina, R.C. "The Baccalaureate: Defining the Undefinable," **Journal of Higher Education**, February, 1974.

Klingstedt, J. L. "Philosophical Basis for Competency-Based Education," **Educational Technology**, November, 1972.

McClelland, David, C. "Testing for Competence Rather Than for 'Intelligence'," **American Psychologist**, January, 1973.

Maxwell, W. David. "PBTE: A Case of the Emperor's New Clothes," **Phi Delta Kappan**, January, 1974. (Although about PBTE not CBC, this is a much referred-to argument against both.)

Upcoming: The final report of the Task Force on Competency-Based Education (CBE), sponsored by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. To include alternate definitions and essential characteristics of CBE; vignettes of nine colleges and universities using it; and treatment of pedagogical, institutional and social issues and their consequences. Contact Educational Policy Research Center, Syracuse.

Also forthcoming is the SREB Undergraduate Reform Project's report on its CBC Conference, held in June in Atlanta.

Alverno College
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
4-year, independent women's college
Enrollment: 750
Contact: Sister Joel Read, President

CBC went into effect with freshman class in Fall, 1973; eventually, entire institution will be competency-based; eight college-wide competencies; eight competencies in each program except music (nine); **FUNDING***: internal, FIPSE (Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education), Ford Venture Grants; **FEATURES:** graduation requirements expressed in competence level units, not semester hours; each competence defined in terms of six developmental levels; assessment occurs in courses and in Assessment Center; **PUBLICATIONS:** list available upon request.

Antioch School of Law
Washington, D.C.
Private, fourth campus of Antioch College, Yellow Springs
Enrollment: 400
Contact: Daniel Seikaly

CBC went into effect in entire institution with founding, Fall, 1972; the number of college-wide competencies is constantly being revised; **FUNDING:** FIPSE and NSF; **FEATURES:** to our knowledge, only law school in nation seeking to define core competencies expected of a legal practitioner by peers and by society; special admissions process; practitioners, judges and clients involved in articulation of competencies; "Professional Boards" put student through all the phases of an actual case in a series of simulations using actors with performance assessed by practitioners; **PUBLICATIONS:** "Competency-based Education for the Legal Profession," $1.

Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, Ohio
Public university
Enrollment: 15,000
Contact: Dr. Richard Giardina

CBC introduced in 1972 in the Modular Achievement Program within the University Division of General Studies; self-selected by about 250 freshman students yearly; five competencies; **FUNDING:** Carnegie Corporation, FIPSE and internal; **PUBLICATIONS:** list available upon request.

College of Public & Community Service
University of Massachusetts, Boston
4-year public university
Enrollment: 375
Contact: Dean John Strange

CBC went into effect for entire college Fall, 1973; student selects 48 competencies from among 120 choices to graduate; **FUNDING:** FIPSE, state and university; **FEATURES:** faculty organized into non-disciplinary groups; student body averages 32 years old and most students work full-time; **PUBLICATIONS:** free brochure; "Competencies," $3.

Community College of Vermont
Montpelier, Vermont
2-year college
Enrollment: 1500
Contact: L.A. Daloz

School began on competency base in Fall, 1971; 15 college-wide competencies, 12-15 in each program; **FUNDING:** state and FIPSE, OEO, Carnegie Foundation; **FEATURES:** no campus, storefront operations throughout eastern and central Vermont; general studies is "content-free," student can design own program in any field around its competencies; **PUBLICATIONS:** price list available upon request.

Florida State University
Tallahassee, Florida
Public university
Enrollment: 20,000
Contact: Dr. John Harris, Division of Instructional Research and Services, or Dr. Gary Peterson, Project Coordinator, Curriculum of Attainments Project

CBC goes into effect in three pilot programs (upper-division baccalaureate biology and nursing and masters in urban and regional planning) Fall, 1974; number of competencies in programs varies from 7 areas to 150 specific competencies; **FUNDING:** FIPSE for planning and implementation projects; **FEATURES:** assessment by faculty jury which includes an outside practicing professional; credit accumulated through completion of learning packages so that students will not have transfer problems; **PUBLICATIONS:** available at no cost.

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Mars Hill College
Mars Hill, North Carolina
4-year, private college
Baptist affiliation
Enrollment: 1600
Contact: Dr. Robert Knott

CBC goes into effect in entire institution Fall, 1974; seven college-wide competencies, with varied number of competencies in each program; **FUNDING:** Kellogg Foundation, FIPSE, internal; **FEATURES:** strong diagnostic testing and counseling program; developmental curriculum organized around Philip Phenix' six patterns of meaning as outlined in his **Realms of Meaning; PUBLICATIONS:** "Competency-based Education at Mars Hill College," $1.

Mount Hood Community College
Gresham, Oregon
2-year college
Enrollment: 9000
Contact: Everett Arnold

CBC went into effect in 1971 in associate degree nursing, typing, biology; will be used in machine shop, shorthand, automotive and office machine repair; number of competencies within each program varies; **FUNDING:** institutional program development funds; **PUBLICATIONS:** none.

Sterling College
Sterling, Kansas
4-year, private college
United Presbyterian affiliation
Enrollment: 470
Contact: Carol Gene Brownlee,
Dean of Curricular
Development

CBC went into effect in entire institution Fall, 1973; nine college-wide competencies, with varied number of competencies in each program; **FUNDING:** Kellogg Foundation and institutional funds; **FEATURES:** evaluation teams for out-of-class learning; only one required course ("How to Acquire Knowledge and How to Use It"); Curriculum Coordinating Council—a body composed of faculty, administrators and students—continuously evaluates curriculum; no distinction between "upper-level" and "lower-level" courses; **PUBLICATIONS:** Catalog supplement, $1.

*no distinction made in this listing between past and present funding sources.

SAMPLE COMPETENCIES IN SIX COLLEGES*

	Institutions					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
1. Comprehend Christian Heritage	•	•				
2. Demonstrate Awareness of Values & Commitments	•	•		•		•
3. Demonstrate How to Use & Acquire Knowledge	•	•	•	•	•	•
4. Comprehend the Artistic & Aesthetic Dimensions of Culture	•	•	•		•	•
5. Comprehend the Relationship of Man to His Physical & Social Culture	•	•	•	•		•
6. Demonstrate Depth Knowledge of One Field	•	•	•	•	•	
7. Demonstrate Physical Skill in a Recreational Area	•	•	•			
8. Demonstrate Competency in Verbal Communication	•	•	•	•	•	•
9. Work in a Group Formulating Problem Solutions and Then Act on Them	•	•				•
10. Proficient in Self-knowledge		•	•	•	•	

*From a chart entitled, "Competency Matrix," developed by the Center for Research and Development in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley, in November, 1973. Lettered institutions repr[illegible]ont actual U.S. colleges and universities.

Comments on CBC

On Competency . . .

If you guarantee a car for 12 months or 12,000 miles, what can you guarantee about an education? If a person learns something as a freshman, what can you guarantee about that by the time he graduates? I can see the headlines now: "Dartmouth College recalls 350 graduates with defective parts."— **Hodgkinson**

The real difference about competency-based education is not evaluation of students, but evaluation of the institution, of faculty roles. Really asking, "Why are we here?" and then insuring that that's what a student will get.— **Huff**

I'd like to suggest three necessary conditions for the success of a CBC. First, the learning outcomes have to include not only pure knowledge, but also skills and attitudes. When we're formulating objectives we have to be continually aware that what we're really trying to do is to take responsibility for producing students who can be successful, functioning adults in a variety of roles in a complex world.

There also ought to be a commitment to following out the logic of the objectives adopted. If the purpose of a college is the transmission of knowledge by the faculty and the acquisition of knowledge by the students, then traditional admissions procedures, teaching roles, graduation requirements and transcripts make sense. But if competence becomes the outcome, maybe nothing, maybe everything, or maybe parts of everything need to be changed.

Finally, an institution has to be brave enough to experiment with new modes of assessment, with faculty giving up some control in this area.— **Edgerton**

Sheila Huff, Task Force on Competency-Based Education

On Grading . . .

You mention a dimension of quality of life—earned income, community service, involvement in the arts—and it has been checked against grades in college, and there's no relationship. Now that's a rather striking statement. It suggests that there's an enormous amount of work needed to insure that when we say a person is meritorious, that such a definition of merit has some function in American life.— **Hodgkinson**

Colleges are being asked to educate instead of to sort. Grading is really just sorting—the business of finding those that are the poorest in a group and those that are the best and continually making the distinction to discourage one and encourage the other. Education should be like golf lessons. If you were trying to learn that sport, you wouldn't expect to be told after a few lessons, "You're an 'F'—better drop out." You'd expect your instructor to say, "Well, now, your stroke is pretty good, but you've got to learn how to grasp the driver a different way," and so on. You'd expect to get feedback, help and encouragement. You'd expect to learn. And more and more, that is what we're expecting of our educational institutions.— **Tyler**

We can keep the same time and methods of instruction, grading particular courses on the curve, and we'll suffer one of the following: a general lowering of performance; a reversion to the practices of the late '50s—flunking out large numbers of students; or, a return to selective admissions policies. None of these is acceptable. The only way to handle the problem is to adopt a mastery learning approach, where we set minimal floors of achievement, but leave time and method of getting there variable and individualized.— **John Harris, Director, Instructional Research and Services, FSU**

Ralph Tyler, Science Research Associates

On Faculty . . .

We have to think in terms of reducing risks of faculty. They have some very real fears—whether working on CBC will help or hinder them in promotions or in transferring to another university, for example.— **Huff**

As an outsider who has visited Mars Hill and Florida State, I am intrigued by some of the emergent faculty leaders. They've become genuinely intellectually excited about defining their disciplines in terms of competency. To certain academics, it's intellectually fun. **— Hodgkinson**

Russell Edgerton, Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education

On Accrediting . . .

I am usually asked if SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) and its accrediting teams are sympathetic to the efforts of institutions developing CBC. I think it's a healthy experience for institutions to develop innovative aspects of their educational programs; I see no accreditation problems with a competency-based program. Our Standard Nine and Ten revisions already reflect the position our Commission has toward such changes.

Yet people continue to assume accreditation of non-traditional programs will be a problem. You see, there is a trap that we all fall into sometimes. When we're looking for someone to blame, we pick someone nearby who we think will protect us. So, many of the academic folks who are looking for trees to hide behind use accrediting associations.

Our real concerns in accrediting are the planning that has gone into CBC and how it relates to the institution's mission; the goals and objectives an institution has set for going this way; the resources an institution has to do a quality job of supporting a CBC; and, finally, the overall quality of the program.— **Grover Andrews, Commission on Colleges; SACS**

On the Disadvantaged . . .

Institutions which have underprepared students, especially minority students, as segments of their populations, should exercise caution in moving toward CBC, particularly at the freshman and sophomore levels. It is necessary to build strategies and processes into CBC to assure that these students—many of whom are not highly motivated academically, have reading deficiencies, lack adequate study habits, and/or have not developed the kind of responsibility required to do effective independent study—will be assisted in their attempts to attain desirable levels of performance. **— Melvin O. Smith, Director, Curricular Development, Norfolk State College**

Harold Hodgkinson, Center for Research & Development University of California, Berkeley

CBC portends great success for minority and disadvantaged students because its well-defined objectives focus on the individual, rather than the system, course, norm, standard, content or past. **— Joseph A. Bennett, Director, Curriculum Development Program, North Carolina A & T State University**

Some Questions . . .

Isn't there a moral architecture built into CBC? In other words, the same knowledge that produces a very competent locksmith could also make a very competent safecracker.

Now, in view of the fact that we have well-documented, deep, devisive value concepts in this country, whom do you suggest educators point to as a source of authority for attempting to mold creature "X" with those competencies instead of creature "Y"? Also, how do you defend this integrating value architecture in a public institution funded by public tax moneys? — **Ambrose Garner, Vice President, South Campus, Miami-Dade Community College**

The competency-based movement is one with considerable political moxie. Clarifying objectives, being explicit about outcomes, accountability—these are all very appealing concepts. They seem to be caught into an attractive net that surrounds the word "competence." Because of this, it seems to me that CBC is one of the most exciting—and the most dangerous—things in American education today.

It's awfully important to be clear about what CBC really is. We must ask ourselves whether this is another academic relabeling exercise, the purpose of which is to throw old practices into new robes; or worse, whether it will further increase the mechanization and bureaucratization of teaching, learning and assessment. Or is it really an educational idea which raises truly fundamental issues and whose logic can be a catalyst in rethinking all the agendas, processes and practices which go on in an educational institution?— **Edgerton**

News From The Region

Florida Southern U. has been named international headquarters for the Association of Institutional Research. Also, an international center for the study and publication of lost Biblical books is being established at **Duke U.**

Law schools at the **U. of Arkansas** and the **U. of Florida** are first and second, respectively, in the region for enrollment of black law students, according to a recent study by the Carnegie and the Rockefeller Foundations. The foundations also announced grants totaling $1.2 million to black law students in the South, whose number has increased from 22 in 1969 to 375 in 1973.

A three-year project to find university inventions otherwise lost in research notes and technical periodicals has been awarded by NSF to the Research Corporation, a New York foundation for the advancement of science. The project will initially concentrate on eight universities, among them: **Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State U.**, and the **U.'s of Maryland and Georgia.**

Auburn U. is launching a project to help the region make a smooth transition to urbanization and industrialization, with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities; **Morehouse College** received an $806,000 grant from DHEW to plan and develop a program in basic medical science which would be essentially equivalent to the first two years of the curriculum of M.D.-granting institutions.

UPDATE (more information on subjects of recent **Regional Spotlights**): **Memphis State U.** has been designated the nation's first regional center for nuclear studies and technical training by the Southern Interstate Nuclear Board (SINB); the Florida Legislature has authorized a Florida Solar Energy Center.

The Medical College of Virginia Schools of Nursing and Medicine at **Virginia Commonwealth U.** have received a $460,000 grant from NIH to establish a Family Nurse Practitioner education program; the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has given grants totaling over $4,690,000 for training dentists in the treatment of the handicapped to 11 institutions, among them the **U.'s of Alabama, Kentucky, Maryland** and **Tennessee.**

NOTE: Colleges and universities are invited to send information relevant to the theme of the November **Regional Spotlight**: lifelong learning.

Note: Regional Spotlight is issued five times each academic year: September, November, January, March and May. The articles are created by the writer-editor with the assistance of persons knowledgeable in the field being treated. Newspaper, magazine and periodical editors are invited to use the material contained herein in whole or in part, without cost, and with or without credit to the Southern Regional Education Board. When SREB material is used, please provide a sample copy of the issue in which it appears to the Board, addressed to the writer-editor's attention.

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Anne D. Mather, Writer-Editor

Published five times a year by the SOUTHERN REGIONAL EDUCATION BOARD 130 Sixth Street, N.W. Atlanta, Georgia 30313

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